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Hist du Canada

PAPER IV.—NOTE ON AN INCIDENT OF EARLY
CANADIAN HISTORY.

By JOHN LANGTON, Esq.

(Read before the Society, Wednesday, 16th December, 1863.)

IN my opening address at the commencement of the present session, I spoke of the numerous discrepancies in the details of almost all events in Roman history, as they are handed down to us, and I expressed an opinion that the modern critics lay far too much stress upon these, as throwing a suspicion upon the general authenticity of the narrative. As an illustration of the very various versions, which may be given by different historians, of an event, the authenticity of which is, nevertheless, perfectly undoubted, I propose to call your attention to one of the earliest incidents in Canadian history, of which hardly any two authors give the same account, whilst we know all the circumstances connected with it upon the very best authority, that of the chief actor himself. The incident in question is Champlain's expedition in 1615, in which he first visited the great lakes, and by which civilized man became acquainted with what is now Upper Canada. The discovery led, indeed, to nothing at the time, as it was not till a full half-century afterwards that the French obtained any permanent footing in the upper country ; but it had, nevertheless, some very important consequences. It was in his company, on that occasion, that the Recollet Fathers first penetrated to the country of the Hurons, and paved the way for those missions whose fate forms such an interesting episode in our early annals ; and the unprovoked attack upon the Iroquois, which formed the excuse for the expedition, was the forerunner of those devastating Indian wars, which cramped the energies of the French colonists during more than a century, and engendered a hostility which was never thoroughly allayed, as long as their rule existed on this continent.

It is a remarkable expedition, moreover, from its boldness, and as being the first example of that spirit of restless enterprize which was characteristic of the French system of colonization, and which presents such a strong contrast to the slow and cautious advances of the early English settlements. To me it has always been especially interesting, as Champlain's route lay through that part of the country where I, more than two centuries later, was one of the first European settlers.

Champlain's narrative is clear and unmistakeable, as all his geographical descriptions are, and if we could misunderstand his words, his map, distorted and imperfect as it is, would leave no doubt as to his route. The Iroquois village which he attacked is laid down on it, and his course is indicated by references to explanatory notes which accompany the map. He started from Montreal, ascended the Ottawa, crossed over by Lake Nipissing and French River to Lake Huron, and then turning to the east, he coasted along till he reached the Huron settlements, between Matchedash Bay and Lake Simcoe. He remained some time at the principal village, whilst his Huron allies were collecting their forces. He calls it Cahiaгуé, a name which does not subsequently occur amongst the numerous villages in that confined peninsula, with which the narratives of the Jesuits make us familiar, and the sites of most of which have clearly been identified, during the last two or three years, by my friend Dr. Taché; but there can be little doubt that it is the same as that subsequently called St. Jean Baptiste by the French, which was situated somewhere in the township of Orillia. Carrying their canoes overland to the narrows, they then crossed Lake Simcoe, made the portage to Balsam Lake, and thence through that chain of lakes, which are the scene of some of my pleasantest recollections, they followed the course of the Otonabee and Trent, and emerged into Lake Ontario by the Bay of Quinté. Passing round the lower extremity of Lake Ontario, they landed, and after a four days' march through the woods, in which they crossed the Oswego River, where it falls out of Lake Oneida, they reached the Iroquois village which was

the object of their attack, near Onondaga Lake ; the site of which is identified by Brodhead with the present town of Liverpool. Being repulsed, they retreated by the same route by which they descended, and Champlain, being unable to obtain guides to take him down the St. Lawrence, returned with them, and found his way to Quebec the next spring by the old portages at Lake Nipissing.

There is only one difficulty with regard to the route, viz., that Champlain mentions five portages below Balsam Lake, some of which, he says, are of four or five leagues, whereas there is only one considerable carrying place of about seven miles. This may have arisen from their not following the main stream, but passing through the Lakes of Belmont and Marmora, and so entering the Trent by Crow River ; a supposition which is rather strengthened by the fact, that the large lake on which they encamped on their return until the ice had formed, and which is clearly Rice Lake, is not mentioned, as if they had already become acquainted with it in descending. The exaggerated length of the portages, however, is no serious objection, as this always occurs in such descriptions—that from Lake Simcoe to Balsam Lake, for instance, being called ten leagues by Champlain, whilst it is really only about fourteen miles. This will not be very surprising to any one who has carried a canoe or a heavy pack through the woods, under which circumstances a mile assumes very formidable proportions. I myself used to frequent a place in those same waters, which was always called and believed to be the three mile portage, but which, having been of late years included in a surveyed township, is found by admeasurement to be somewhat less than a mile and a quarter. These, however, are unimportant details. As to the main course of his journey there can be no doubt ; but the most contradictory accounts of it are given by almost all succeeding historians, and I have found none who relate it correctly, except Brodhead in his history of New York, before mentioned.

The first edition of Lescarbot, published in 1611, cannot, of course, contain any notice of an occurrence in 1615, but it does mention a mythical expedition to Lake Ontario as having been

made in 1610, which might easily be confounded with it. This account Lescarbot professes to have had from the lips of Champlain himself, who told him that he had ascended the St. Lawrence above Sault St. Louis (Lachine Rapids) and fought a battle on a great lake ninety leagues long. Now, Champlain had certainly never seen Lake Ontario at that date, though he had heard of its existence, and in his map, published in 1613, he indicates this large lake, and appears to have made the curious mistake of placing the great fall, of which he had heard, at its outlet instead of at its inlet. Lescarbot, no doubt, mixed up his account of the real skirmish with the Iroquois on Lake Champlain in that year, with the rumors of a great lake above the St. Lawrence. In his third edition, published in 1618, Lescarbot brings down the history of Canada to 1615, but he makes no mention of Champlain's journey.

Sagard ought to have known all about it, for he was a missionary amongst the Hurons only eight years afterwards, and he had then, as a companion, Father Joseph Caron, who had formed part of Champlain's original expedition. He does indeed mention, in his History of Canada, that Caron had spent the winter of 1615-16 amongst the Hurons; but Caron cannot have been very communicative, for he adds: "*De la façon qu'il fut traité en son voyage, et reçu dans le pays, ie ne scay pas les particularitez pour ne m'y estre pas trouvé.*" But as to Champlain, he not only does not mention his warlike expedition, which, perhaps, was not in his line, but he does not even allude to him as having been amongst the Hurons along with Caron.

Lalemant also should have been well informed, as he was the head of the Huron Mission, some years later; but in speaking of the establishment of the Mission at St. Jean Baptiste (Champlain's Cahiagué), in the year 1639-40, he says that this was the place where Champlain principally resided when there twenty-two years before, thus misdating the expedition by two or three years.

Ducreux is more the historian of the Jesuit Missions than of Canada, and he only commences his regular history in 1625, and does not notice any of Champlain's earlier adventures.

La Potherie enters into some detail with respect to Champlain's two first forays against the Iroquois, when he approached them by the Richelieu River, in company with the Algonquins and Montagnets; but he makes no mention of the last, and much the most important one, in which the Hurons were his allies.

Cadwallader Colden, in his History of the Five Nations of Canada, is equally silent about the last expedition, though he too mentions the two former ones.

The Abbé Raynal, Jeffrey, and Wm. Smith follow the same course, mentioning only the two earlier expeditions.

Charlevoix speaks of it, and comments severely upon the policy of the undertaking itself, and upon the manner in which it was carried out; but he gives no indication of the direction followed, and merely says that having collected their forces amongst the Hurons, they marched against the enemy. In this he is followed by many later writers, as Bidaud, Boyd, W. H. Smith, and Warburton, most of whom even leave it in doubt as to where the expedition rendezvoused.

As to the rest of the historians, the more they enter into particulars, the more they go astray. Garneau places Cahiagué on Lake Ontario, and applies Champlain's name of Mer Douce to that lake, instead of to Lake Huron; and he says that they had only to cross the St. Lawrence in latitude 43° in order to reach the enemy. It would not be easy to see what the latitude has got to do with the matter, as Ontario lies, through its whole length, almost in the direction of a parallel of latitude, but altogether to the north of 43° . The fact is that Champlain, who never saw anything of the lake except its outlet into the St. Lawrence, places that in latitude 43° —in which he is mistaken; but the use of introducing the latitude is obvious in his case, but quite purposeless in Garneau, even if it were correct, as it would not at all assist in fixing the locality. Moreover, Garneau makes Champlain spend the winter south of Lake Ontario, amongst the Neuters; whilst we know that he never visited the Neuters at all, and that they did not live south of Lake Ontario, but in the western peninsula of

Canada, having only one or two outlying villages across the Niagara river.

Roger makes Champlain find the Iroquois on Lake Huron, and says that he returned to Quebec by way of Lake Ontario.

Miss Roy says he collected his allies somewhere near Green Bay, on Lake Michigan, and supposes that the Iroquois fort, which he attacked, was on the Georgian Bay.

McMullen makes Cahiagué at the extremity of Lake Huron, and says that they proceeded thence through Lake St. Clair, and attacked the Iroquois near where Detroit now stands.

Murray, in his "British North America," introduces the most beautiful confusion. He calls the allies Algonquins, and not Hurons; and after giving a very detailed account of their collecting at Cahiagué, and their proceedings there, he makes them go down a chain of small lakes, not to Lake Ontario, but to Lake Huron; and after quitting Lake Huron, he says that they struck into the interior to a lake, which he supposes to be Lake George—evidently mixing this expedition up with that six years before in 1609, in which they did defeat the Iroquois on Lake George, having reached it by Lake Champlain.

But the most astonishing perversion of the story occurs in a state paper, of which we have a copy in our own MS. collection. It is a Mémoire, prepared by the Marquis of Dénonville, Governor General of Canada, and signed by Louis XIV. himself, and countersigned by Colbert. It bears date May 16, 1688, and its object is to shew the prior claim of France to the whole country of the great lakes. After setting forth Champlain's previous discoveries, it proceeds thus: "Et en l'année 1611 et 1612, il monta par la grande rivière jusqu'au lac Huron, qu'on appelle la Mer Douce; de là il fut à la nation du Petun, puis à la nation Neutre, et à celle des Mascoutins, qui demeuraient alors vers l'endroit qu'on appelle Sakiman. De cet endroit il alla vers (*avec*) les sauvages Algonquins et Hurons, en guerre contre les Iroquois. Il passa par des lieux qu'il a décrits lui-même dans son livre, qui ne sont autres que le Détroit, et le lac Erié." And later on in the same document,

it is said that Joliet and Marquet had taken formal possession of Lake Erie, "pour renouveler les prises de possession du Sr. de Champlain en 1612."

Now, if one may be allowed to contradict such great persons as Louis XIV and Colbert, I should say that they can either never have read Champlain, or they must have read him very carelessly, for there is hardly a statement in the passage quoted which is not incorrect. In 1611 Champlain sailed for Europe, about two months after he broke up his winter quarters at Quebec, and never ascended the river higher than Montreal; and in 1612 he never was in Canada at all. But even if we amend the date to 1615, the details are equally untrue. He did certainly (*after* his return from the Iroquois) visit the Petuns during the winter, who lived in the northern parts of the present counties of Grey and Bruce, and he mentions the Neuters as living further south, but he expressly says that he was dissuaded from visiting them. As to the Mascoutins, whom he had heard of under their Huron name of Asistagueronon or *Nation du feu*, they lived on Lake Michigan, of which he knew so little, that in his map, published seventeen years later, he makes it stretch away to the north, instead of to the south, of Lake Huron. Neither did he ever see Detroit or Lake Erie, and it is doubtful if he knew of the existence of the latter even by report, for in his map in 1632, he merely connects Lakes Huron and Ontario by a river.* The first certain

* In the note on the ancient geography of Canada, in the appendix to the Rev. P. Martin's translation of Bressani's Relation (Montreal, 1852), Champlain is quoted as an authority for the name *Lac Derié*. If the name occurs in his book, it has escaped me; it certainly is not to be found in his map. I suspect the compilers of that useful appendix have obtained the name, with that spelling, from the map of 1643, which professes to be *recueillie et dressée sur diverses relations modernes*. In the configuration of the country it is an exact copy of Champlain's map, but it contains some half a dozen new names, indicating increased geographical knowledge, and amongst them *Lac Derié* under the river which occupies its place. It must be from this map also, and not from Champlain's as quoted, that the compilers obtained the name *Kaoutotun* for the great Manitoulin Island.

From about 1640 Lake Erie was well known, though lying out of the usual track, and it is not very unfaithfully represented by Sanson in 1657, and by Ducreux in 1680; but there is, in the Parliamentary Library, a map of as late a date as 1664, said to contain *les terres nouvellement découvertes suivant les mémoires du P. du Val*, in which Lake Erie does not appear even by name; and

account we have of any one having visited the Neuters is the letter of De la Roche Daillon, in 1626, published in Sagard's History. As to Lake Erie, it appears doubtful whether even in 1640 Le Jeune knew of its existence, for he gives a description of the whole lake region, including Lake Superior, without any allusion to it. The first clear account which we have of it is in Lalemant's Relation of 1641, and the first journey through it, of which I have found any mention, is that of two missionaries named Dolier and Galinée, as late as 1670.

When I was examining into the manner in which the probability of ancient Roman history is tested by its internal evidences, I could not help being struck with the uncertainty which would rest upon this accident in our own early annals, if Champlain's original journal had not been preserved. The ominous silence of most of the earlier historians would be held to throw a doubt upon there having ever been any such expedition at all; and the irreconcilable differences in all those who enter into any detail, would appear incompatible with there having been any authentic record to refer to. The special object which the French authorities had in putting forth their version, would appear very suspicious, and would be held, and very justly so, to indicate that the story had been got up to meet the requirements of their policy. And Brodhead's narrative, the only true one, from its giving minute particulars not mentioned elsewhere, and from its divergence from all other accounts, would probably have been looked upon as a pure fabrication of a later age.

Hennepin, in 1682, says that its western extension (which existed only in imagination) had never been explored.

I will take this opportunity of correcting another error in the appendix to Martin's Bressani. *Lacus Ouëntaronius* is given as one of the names of Ontario on the authority of Ducreux; but Ducreux, in the body of his map, calls it *Lacus Ontario*, and the *Ouëntaronius* in the enlarged "Chorographia Regionis Huronum," in the margin, is evidently Lake Simcoe, which was known by that name (Wentaronk) down to the time of Governor Simcoe.

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